United Nations E/CN.5/2011/NGO/18

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2010

Original: English

Commission for Social Development
Forty-ninth session
9-18 February 2011
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: poverty eradication

Statement submitted by AARP, Global Action on Aging, HelpAge International, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, International Federation on Ageing and International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.5/2011/1.

10-66478 (E) 211210

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Statement

Strengthening the protection of older people's rights in poverty eradication strategies

Introduction

1. The rights of older women and men are rarely included in development and poverty eradication policies and programmes. As a result such initiatives fail to address poverty in old age or the intergenerational nature of poverty. As populations age and the proportion of older women and men increases, their role and contribution to the eradication of their own and their families' poverty becomes even more important.

Poverty and human rights

2. It is increasingly acknowledged that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of human rights violations and discrimination. Human rights are interdependent and interrelated: the protection of one right has an impact on the enjoyment of others. There is also a growing consensus about the multidimensional nature of poverty, that is that lack of income is not the only thing that makes people poor. Lack of opportunity and participation, limited access to health care, poor nutrition and poor education, deprivation of knowledge and lack of access to information are all interdependent denials of rights that contribute to people's poverty.

Older people's poverty and human rights

3. According to the United Nations Population Division, older people will outnumber children for the first time in history by 2045. The world is ageing at a rate that is unprecedented, without parallel in human history, so the numbers of people facing age discrimination and poverty in old age are likely to increase.

4. Older people are particularly affected by chronic poverty.[1] Without appropriate social protection and other measures to protect older people's rights, a lifetime of poverty is exacerbated in old age. Older women are particularly vulnerable after suffering from a lifetime of gender inequalities including lower pay for equal work and the inability to make contributions to pension schemes or accumulate assets.

5. Older people's poverty is a global issue and not confined to developing countries: on average 13.3 per cent of people over 65 in countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are poor compared with 10.6 per cent of the general population.[2]

6. Older people's vulnerability to income poverty is closely linked to the denial of their right to social security. It has been estimated that fewer than one in five

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[1] Chronic Poverty Research Centre, *The Chronic Poverty Report 2008-9: Escaping Poverty Traps*, p. 6.

[2] OECD Income Distribution Database, cited in the draft report on the current status of the social situation, well-being, participation in development and rights of older people, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 2010.

people over 60 worldwide receive a pension,[3] which suggests that as many as 607 million older people lack income security.

7. For many who do receive a pension, contributory or non-contributory, the level is so low that it does not enable them to enjoy an adequate standard of living and other rights that often require an income, such as access to health care and the rights to housing, food, water and sanitation. A social pensions database compiled by HelpAge International shows that in India, the Republic of Moldova and Thailand, for example, non-contributory pensions represent just 5 per cent of average earnings.

8. Age discrimination in employment also directly impacts on older people's income poverty. Millions of older women and men in low- and middle-income countries are denied their right to decent work, a right which is now widely acknowledged as being essential for sustainable development and poverty eradication.[4] According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 70 per cent of men and nearly 40 per cent of women over 60 in least developed countries continue to work, but many face significant challenges including insecure work, low wages, difficulty accessing capital and credit, unpaid and unrecognized work and exclusion from skills-development programmes.

9. Income insecurity is, however, only one aspect of older people's poverty. Older women and men experience other forms of poverty as a result of age discrimination and denial of their rights.

10. Deprivation of knowledge and lack of access to information are key aspects of poverty. Data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization show that literacy rates of people over 65 are lower than those of the overall adult population. In some countries less than 25 per cent of the older population is literate, for example in Mozambique where 19 per cent of the older population is literate compared with 48 per cent of the total population. In many countries older women have even lower literacy rates, lower than that of older men and as low as 4 per cent in Nepal. The inability to read and write influences the enjoyment of other rights and makes moving out of poverty more difficult.

11. Poor health is another aspect of poverty. While individual biological and genetic factors play a role, older people's health status is also influenced by the extent to which their rights to social security, adequate housing, food, water, freedom from violence and abuse, education and work are protected. However, older people continue to be overlooked and deprioritized in health policies and programmes. There is limited attention to non-communicable diseases and little basic gerontology and geriatric training of health workers. In addition, ageism and age discrimination occur at all levels: from household decision-making about scarce resources, to ageist attitudes of health professionals towards older people, to the lack of investment in geographically and financially accessible services and medication.

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[3] A. Forteza, I. Lucchetti and M. Pallares-Miralles, "Measuring the coverage gap", in R. Holzmann, D. A. Robalino and N. Takayama, eds., *Closing the Coverage Gap: Role of Social Pensions and Other Retirement Income Transfers*, Washington, World Bank, 2009, pp. 23-40.

[4] HelpAge International, *Forgotten workforce: older people and their right to decent work* (London, 2010), p. 4.

12. Inability to participate in your community and decision-making processes that affect you is another component of poverty. Many older people remain excluded from these processes owing to frailty, being housebound and not having access to appropriate transport to enable them to participate. Lack of identity documentation is another major barrier to participation.

13. This multidimensional nature of poverty and its direct relationship to the enjoyment of human rights demands poverty eradication programmes and policies that are based on human rights and social justice.

Older people's rights in poverty eradication strategies

14. Increased attention is being paid to older people's rights at the Third Committee of the General Assembly, by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women which recently adopted general recommendation No. 27 on older women and protection of their human rights, and by the Human Rights Council. The independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty recognized in her 2010 annual report that "non-contributory pensions can significantly reduce poverty and vulnerability among old people, in particular for women, who live longer and are less likely to benefit from contributory systems" (see A/HRC/14/31).

15. Greater attention to protecting the rights of older people in poverty eradication strategies is needed. The impact on poverty of age discrimination and denial of older women's and men's rights needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into poverty eradication strategies.

16. Developing strategies to reduce older people's poverty would not be at the expense of other rights holders. Poverty is intergenerational and rights are interdependent and indivisible. Realizing the rights of one group can often result in the greater enjoyment of rights by another group. For example, realizing older people's right to social security in South Africa resulted in girls who live in households which receive a non-contributory pension being 7 per cent more likely to be enrolled full time in school than girls living in households without a pension.[5]

Recommendations

17. The High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly held in September 2010 refocused attention on how to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The outcome document[6] recognizes the need for comprehensive systems of social security including establishing a minimum level of social security and health care for all (para. 70 (g)) to accelerate progress on the poverty eradication goal. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, in paragraphs 48 and 49, also recommends appropriate social security measures as key to reducing the proportion of people living in extreme poverty.

18. This can be implemented through the adoption of a set of social protection mechanisms, including social transfers, which together span an individual's lifetime. These mechanisms ensure comprehensive coverage and protection of rights that deal

[5] M. Samson and others, The Social and Economic Impact of South Africa's Social Security System, Economic Policy Research Institute Research Paper No. 37 (Capetown, 2008), p. 73.

[6] General Assembly resolution 65/1.

with both age-related vulnerability (during childhood and old age) and the economic shocks relating to life cycle changes — including unemployment, pregnancy, widowhood, disability and ill-health — which can increase the risk of poverty. This life cycle approach provides consistent and cumulative benefits for individuals, including older people, throughout their lives and supports households for the long term by tackling intergenerational poverty transmission.

19. Specific income poverty eradication strategies have to be complemented by greater protection of older women's and men's rights more broadly. Existing human rights instruments do not provide adequate legal protection of the rights of older people. In practice, too, older women's and men's rights are not being sufficiently addressed or protected through the existing human rights system.

20. There has been increased debate among Member States and civil society around the need for a special rapporteur and a convention on the rights of older people. These new human rights instruments would not only clarify Government responsibilities towards older women and men and improve accountability, but would also provide a framework for policy and decision-making. Application of such a framework to poverty eradication would ensure that strategies take into account the impact of the interdependence of rights on older people's poverty and that of the households and communities in which they live.